DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 450 CS 013 048

AUTHOR Giddings, Louise R.
TITLE Early Field Placement in Education Programs.
PUB DATE 1998-02-10
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Guides - General (050)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College School Cooperation; Elementary Education; *Field Experience Programs; Higher Education; Methods Courses; *Practicum Supervision; *Practicums; Program Development; Program Evaluation; Program Implementation; Reading
IDENTIFIERS City University of New York Medgar Evers Coll

ABSTRACT

Noting that both the college and the collaborating schools gain from early field placement (prior to student teaching) in education programs, this paper presents a prototype for early placement practicums based on 10 years experience in providing practicums for reading methods courses for Medgar Evers College, City University of New York (Brooklyn). The first section discusses planning for early placement practicums, and course objectives, methodology, and evaluation of students in the practicum. The second section presents suggestions for selecting schools for early placement--whether for regular day programs or for after-school early placements. The third section discusses preparing students for the practicum, including before beginning the field assignment and beginning in the field site. The fourth section addresses the role of the college supervisor in the practicum. The conclusion is that all participants should reflect on and in some way give an evaluation at the end of a course practicum. (Contains nine references.) (RS)

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EARLY FIELD PLACEMENT IN EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Dr. Louise R. Giddings
Medgar Evers College
The City University of New York

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EARLY FIELD PLACEMENT IN EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Early placement teaching practicums are planned field-based teaching experiences provided for students in education courses prior to student teaching. The practicums, which place students in elementary schools for field assignments, are an integral part of course activities. For a fifteen week semester, an instructor may wish to designate five or six weeks at the end of the semester to the practicum. The practicum days should be listed in the course syllabus so that students will have a field experience focus from the first day of the term. In the schools, students are exposed to a wealth of instructional resources and become participant observers in the educational system. Further, the students can begin to develop and hone teaching skills as they work with children under the guidance and supervision of professional educators.

Both the college and the collaborating schools gain from practicum programs. The exchanges and cooperative endeavors between the college and the school systems help to give greater depth and meaning to the work of the college. The school community benefits from the intellectual stimulation provided by the academic community. The children involved in such collaborations have the assistance of trained individuals who work with them on individual and/or small group bases offering

instruction, enrichment, and special attention. There is evidence of the effectiveness of such collaboratives in improving the achievement of children, particularly in reading (Hiebert & Taylor, 1994; Slavin, Madden, & Karweit, 1989). The following prototype for early placement practicums is based on ten years experience in providing practicums for reading methods courses for Medgar Evers College, City University of New York in Community School Districts 16 and 17 of the New York City Public School System.

I. Planning for Early Placement Practicums

A. Objectives

The early placement experience should be considered an inherent part of the selected course and should be provided for in the overall goals and objectives of the course. A practicum is not an appendage or an extension of a course. The list of course objectives should include objectives that are specifically related to the practicum.

Sample objectives for practicums might be expressed as follows:

(Reading Methods Course)

1. The student will demonstrate knowledge and application of the relationship between assessment and instruction through work with one or more children in the following areas:

a. Reading for details

b. Understanding the main idea of a selection

c. Drawing conclusions

d. Interpreting figurative language

(Education Foundations Course)

1. The student will observe instruction in one classroom for a week, determine specific theoretical underpinnings of the teacher, and give a written report identifying and justifying theoretical determinations.

2. After observing a teacher in the classroom, the student will interview the teacher concerning his/her philosophy of education and give a written report.

B. Methodology

The practicum itself can be considered as a type of course methodology along with more conventional methods such as lecture and discussion. It is indeed a learning strategy. In addition, specific methods that students must employ in the field should be stated in the syllabus section related to field work activities. For example, reading methods students may be required to conduct lessons in the field utilizing the directed reading approach, the language experience approach, and the individualized reading approach.

C. Evaluation of Students in the Practicum

The college instructor should make sure that evaluation methods and criteria are clearly explained in the course syllabus. Instructors may consider portfolio assessment for practicum activities. Students would have to demonstrate through their portfolios that they have achieved stated objectives and fulfilled the fieldwork requirements. They might give evidence through items such as journals, lesson plans, unit plans, audiotapes, videotapes, children's work and written reports based on specific field assignments. McLaughlin & Vogt (1996) offer a comprehensive discussion of the use of portfolio assessment in education courses.

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II. Selecting Schools for Early Placements

Schools for early placement need to be considered for day classes as well as for courses that meet after regular elementary school hours. The following are suggestions for identifying appropriate schools.

A. Schools for Regular Day Programs

For regular day programs, the following factors should be considered in selecting a school for early placement experiences.

1. Curriculum. The curriculum of the school should support the content and objectives of the college course. A language arts methods course, for example, which emphasizes the deveolopment of literature units should have assess to a school that places importance on literature and makes use of literature units in teaching.

2. Methodology. The college should identify schools that utilize varied instructional approaches. Too often traditional teaching methods are employed in the schools and little attention is given to instruction which incorporates contemporary research and information on teaching and learning.

3. Location. The location of the early placement site should be given considerable attention. Schools should be selected with commuting arrangements of students as well as proximity to the college in mind.

4. Resources. The quality of the physical resources in the school should be given careful consideration. Instructional materials should be adequate and up-todate. The facility should be orderly and well-maintained.

5. Staff. Principals in early placement settings are usually the key to facilitating practicum experiences. A supportive administrator will set the tone for teachers and children to take seriously the goals of the college and the role of the education students in the school. Competent, cooperative teachers are crucial to the success of early placement programs. Teachers should not only have expertise in their areas of teaching but should indicate their willingness to work with the college students.

B. Schools for After-School Early Placements

Practicums for courses that meet after regular elementary school program hours may utilize existing after school instructional programs or establish special tutorial programs for the practicum. If an existing after school program is used, the college instructor should use the same factors discussed above

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for regular day school placement, namely,----
curriculum, methodology, location, resources and staff. If, however, the site used offers no established program, the college instructor along with the school administrator can develop an after school tutorial program with selected children from the school. In this case, the college students will plan for and work with children under the direction and supervision of the college instructor. The college instructor and/or competent students should periodically present demonstration lessons in the tutorial program to provide teaching models (Invernizzi, Juel & Rosemary, 1997). Also, videotapes of good teaching practices can be viewed, discussed critiqued in seminars.

School personnel may be called upon to hold information sessions, make available or suggest materials, recommend teaching strategies, and provide background information on children. In after school programs as well as day programs, school staff may volunteer to hold orientation sessions for the college students. Programs with a tutorial center format should be carefully planned by the instructor and students to provide the best possible learning experiences for children.

III. Preparing Students for the Practicum

A. Before Beginning the Field Assignment

At least one class session should be set aside to discuss with students the nature of the practicum. Day students should understand that when placed in a regular school program, the practicum will allow for gradual introduction to teaching as they assume more and more responsibility while working under the guidance of a cooperating teacher and the university supervisor. Students in tutorial programs will need direction in structuring teaching sessions for children. The nature of the responsibility should be discussed. In many instances, thematic approaches can be planned from which students can adapt lessons to the needs of children to whom they are assigned. The college supervisor should discuss thoroughly with all students the objectives and requirements of the practicum and the importance of planning for instruction.

Attention should also be given to practical concerns. The college supervisor should discuss matters such as parking facilities at the school site, time requirements, punctuality, appropriate dress, and important policies and procedures of the school. Students should also be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the facilities and resources of the school

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The importance of observation, particularly in the beginning stages of the practicum should be pointed out. Guidelines for observing should be offered. Students should discuss what to observe and be encouraged to keep a journal to record reactions and reflections.

Students need to be made aware of the importance of self-evaluation. They must continuously evaluate their own progress while participating in practicum activities. They should analyze the effectiveness of their lessons and ask for feedback from the supervisor and from cooperating teachers. Reviewing videotapes and audiotapes of lessons can also be helpful to students as they study their instructional practices.

B. Beginning in the Field Site

The supervisor should plan ahead with school personnel for student placements and should provide some guidelines to cooperating teachers for supervising students. Guidelines should offer suggestions for orienting students to the classroom, planning with students, and involving students in classroom instruction. The first meeting in the school site should be an orientation session jointly planned by the school's administration and the college supervisor. At this meeting, students should be informed about the school and its instructional programs, the nature of the student population, expectations of the school for the practicum, and other pertinent

matters. Various staff members may address students about their work in the school. Often, staff members will offer to assist students by sharing materials and ideas during the period of the practicum. Students should also be allowed to raise questions of the school staff at this time. Following the orientation session, students may be taken to individual classrooms and introduced to teachers. All succeeding visits to the school should involve actual fieldwork on the part of the students.

IV. The Role of the College Supervisor in the Practicum

The college supervisor should be based in the participating school at all times while students are involved in the practicum experience for his/her course. During the practicum, the supervisor should:

1. Visit with and observe students during teaching assignments and provide feedback to students concerning their work.

2. be available before, during, and after the practicum period to confer with students, offer assistance, and guide students in self-evaluation.

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3. Make sure that there is adequate communication among the parties involved in the practicum.

4. Make formal evaluations of students based on evidence such as observations, conferences, portfolio assessment and information provided by cooperating teachers.

5. Provide periodic seminars for students. Seminar sessions should be built into the practicum schedule. Students need the opportunity to share, reflect, raise questions, and receive pertinent information. Seminars may also be used to model instructional techniques. When actual meetings are not feasible, the supervisor may place notices on a designated bulletin board or circulate memorandums. Special seminars may be arranged on the college campus.

Reflecting on the Field Experience

At the conclusion of a course practicum, all participants should reflect on and in some way give an evaluation of the program. Feedback should be sought from school personnel, children in the program, and the college students. Students should be asked to give a written statement in which they give their evaluation of the practicum and their views concerning the benefits of the program to themselves and to the children.

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Comments and observations can be useful in refining organizational and instructional aspects of the program. A structured survey or questionnaire might be added to the written statement in order to gain more specific infomation concerning routines, methods, materials, supervision, etc.

It is generally found that students report very favorably on practicums that are well planned and implemented. The unique learning experience they receive in the field is invaluable and could not be achieved in a classroom on the college campus.

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